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USSR:

Playing Down the Nuclear Disaster

Soviet television is reporting extensively on the lack of contamination in the Kiev region—some 60 miles (95 kilometers) from the reactor—where only minimal fallout probably has occurred. (b)(3)

Coverage of the May Day celebrations in Kiev projected an appearance of normalcy, with Politburo member Shcherbitskiy presiding over the festivities. Meanwhile, the Soviets claim to have extinguished the fire. (b)(1)

Moscow is sticking to its story that only two are dead and 197 injured—18 seriously. Although the Soviets claim there are no serious radiation injuries, they have accepted assistance from a US expert in bone marrow transplants. The expert is traveling to the USSR today. Bone marrow transplants are the last resort in treating persons who have received lethal doses of radiation. (b)(3) (b)(3)

Comment: A cutoff of Western television links for six days beginning 30 April presumably is an attempt to control the story and to stem the mounting tide of adverse reaction in Europe. At present there is probably no short-term health hazard to persons beyond 25 to 30 miles from Chernobyl, and the release of radioactive material has decreased. (b)(3)

The accident apparently was triggered by a loss of power followed by a loss of coolant to the reactor. The event probably occurred over a period of several hours, thus minimizing the immediate loss of life. (b)(3)

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Special Analysis

EUROPE: **Reaction to Chernobyl**

The Soviet Union's refusal to provide information on the Chernobyl accident has undercut General Secretary Gorbachev's campaign to improve the Soviets' appearance in both Western and Eastern Europe. The accident will also revive West European antinuclear movements and may cause further economic hardships in Eastern Europe. [redacted] (b)(3)

All of the West European governments are clearly troubled and angered by the Soviets' behavior. Attitudes almost certainly will harden toward General Secretary Gorbachev, who has up to now had some credibility in Western Europe. The Scandinavian countries have been most directly affected, and their reactions the most severe. Sweden's energy minister condemned Soviet secretiveness, and Sweden and Denmark have banned the import of foodstuffs from the USSR and Eastern Europe. [redacted] (b)(3)

Public statements by West European governments, however, may be limited by a reluctance to overplay the dangers of radioactivity, given their own dependence on nuclear energy and because immediate danger from Chernobyl is minimal. France and Belgium each get almost two-thirds of their electricity from nuclear power, West Germany almost one-third. [redacted] (b)(3)

Government responses have been measured, but public and press reaction throughout Western Europe has been more visceral. There is no evidence of panic, but drug stores in northern Europe report a run on iodine, believed to impede the absorption of some radiation. The US Embassy in Copenhagen reports that demonstrations are expected at the Soviet Embassy. They are likely to be repeated elsewhere. [redacted] (b)(3)

This incident is likely to revive antinuclear and ecological movements. Peace movements in the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands may reemerge, and West Germany's Greens may reap benefits in coming elections. [redacted] (b)(3)

There may be increased public pressure, which leftist parties will echo for progress on arms control. More conservative groups, however, will note the Soviet's lack of candor over Chernobyl and will take a dimmer view of verification proposals. [redacted] (b)(3)

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Implication for Eastern Europe

The Chernobyl accident and Moscow's response almost certainly will fan anti-Soviet and antinuclear sentiments among East Europeans. Popular cynicism about the willingness of the authorities to tell the full truth and the lack of hard information from the Soviets will undermine efforts by East European governments to reassure their citizens.
[redacted] (b)(3)

Unofficial environmental movements will use the accident to point out the dangers of nuclear energy, but they will not be able to undo their governments' commitment to nuclear power. In Yugoslavia, the accident will provide ammunition to the growing antinuclear movement and diminish Soviet chances of winning the $2.5 billion contract for a nuclear power plant. [redacted] (b)(3)

Fears of radioactive contamination of farm products in Eastern Europe are prompting some Western trading partners to consider bans on agricultural imports from the region. The embargo by Sweden and Denmark alone will have little impact, a ban by a number of West European countries would upset the region's trade balances and precarious hard currency positions. East European countries—particularly Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia—depend on agricultural products for roughly a tenth of total exports to the developed West, $2.5 billion in 1984. The risk to hard currency exports probably has contributed to Eastern Europe's efforts to play down the Chernobyl accident. [redacted] (b)(3)

The disaster could also affect the East European economies significantly in domestic food production, either through contamination that forces increased hard currency imports or if losses to Soviet agriculture lead Moscow to pressure Eastern Europe harder to supply agricultural products. East European hopes for increased hard currency earnings from tourism seem doomed, and the accident casts doubt on the region's plans to boost the use of nuclear power in the future. [redacted] (b)(3)

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